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The Crucial Link: Public Administration, Responsibility, and the Public Interest

Where men once said "the common good," we now say "the public interest"; where men once said "duty," we now say "responsibility." In these shifts of terminology lie much of the meaning and the problem of modern political thought, and therefore of thought about public administration.

The three volumes under consideration, containing together more than fifty essays clustered around some very general (and important) themes, provide a rich sample of contemporary opinion on what is widely regarded as the "soft" side of political science and public administration. The two volumes edited by Carl Friedrich, Responsibility (Nomos III) and The Public Interest (Nomos V), are yearbooks of the American Society of Political and Legal Philosophy, of which Friedrich is founder and elder statesman, and are based on the papers and discussions at the society's 1958 and 1960 annual meetings. The papers in the Harlan Cleveland--Harold Lasswell collection were prepared for a 1960 Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life. The breathtaking range of this volume—Ethics and Bigness: Scientific, Academic,
Religious, Political, and Military—requires a preface and three introductions to get it properly launched; but the subject becomes somewhat less formidable as the student of public administration discovers that most of the essays are concerned with familiar problems of bureaucracy and responsibility. Obviously it is almost impossible to give an overall view of such volumes; moreover, the Review's policy leaves the commentator with a wide discretion in the exercise of his duty and encourages him to state and reflect a bit upon what seem to him to be the major issues. The result inevitably is that some essays—including some good ones—are not treated adequately or at all.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the public interest and particularly with Glendon Schubert's and Frank Sorauf's attacks on it. These essays merit special consideration both because earlier articles by these authors helped to foster the current round of discussion of the public interest and because of the vigor and, one gathers, the influence of their remarks.1 There is, Schubert asserts, "no public-interest theory worthy of the name."2 "Perhaps," concludes Sorauf, "the academicians ought to take the lead in drawing up a list of ambiguous words and phrases 'which never would be missed.' For such a list I would have several candidates, but it should suffice here to nominate the 'public interest.'"3

Conceptual Criticisms of "Public Interest"

Generally speaking, there are three major parts of the criticism of the meaningfulness and usefulness of "public interest": that the idea is undemocratic, that it is vague, and that it is unscientific. The belief that the idea of the public interest is undemocratic helps to agitate

2. Friedrich, The Public Interest, p. 175.
3. Ibid., p. 190.
Schubert to impassioned scorn against what he calls the "idealists." 4 The argument is not very sophisticated. "According to idealist thought, congressmen are responsible neither to political parties nor to their constituencies; they have a higher obligation to God and to their own consciences." 5 The argument at this level is sufficiently met by C. W. Cassinelli, who points out that "the immediate and normally overriding responsibility of every official is to exercise his authority [allocated by the Constitution] to the best of his ability; but the public interest is still the final justification for this authority and for the constitution that confers it." The official "cannot avoid exercising discretion, and in doing so he often must act according to his own interpretation of the public interest." 6 Obviously this does not dispose of the problem; there is a question whether "public interest" is reconcilable with "democracy"—a question that a genuine exploration of "public interest" would have to take up. The absence from this volume of anything but oblique or superficial discussion of this central question, by either critics or defenders, testifies to the character and quality of much contemporary discussion of the public interest. 7 The fact is that its allegedly undemocratic character is the least important argument made by the critics of "public interest"—thus perhaps the willingness to stop at caricature. This is still a political question (and as such it comes into prominence when the theme shifts to responsibility); and academic discussions of "public interest" these days have a strikingly unpolitical character.

The second allegation against "public interest" is that it is hopelessly vague. "[W]e are widely reassured," says Sorauf, "that politics (and its study) is an art rather than a science, and that a certain genteel fuzziness—often masquerading as literary elegance—would

4. To enter into the questionable character of Schubert's approach and of his categories would require a detailed examination of his book, which would leave no space for anything else. Illustrative, perhaps, is the fact that although Schubert sets out in his book to deal with writing about the public interest during the last three decades, he finds it necessary to cast his net back some eighteen decades for his first "idealists"—a group known in one of his earlier formulations as "Platonists"—and that his catch turns out to be James Madison.

5. Ibid., p. 166.

6. Ibid., pp. 52–53.

7. William S. Minor argues, for example: "The shared responsibility necessary to the development and maintenance of democratic relations within and among publics depends basically upon man's sincere search for evidence, because it is evidence rather than mere opinion which is useful in resolving conflicts of interest." Compare with Federalist 10.

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not be out of place." There are grounds, in this volume and the others here considered, for such impatience, although it should be said that literary inelegance does not necessarily result in clarity and precision.

To dissipate the vagueness of "public interest," its fundamental grounds and implications would have to be explored, which Schubert and Sorauf scarcely begin to do. One might begin by observing that the most interesting and revealing quality of the term is precisely the quality that the critics wish to throw out: its implication of a good. As a man's interest is what is good for him, so the public interest is what is good for the public; and we distinguish, therefore, as Hamilton does in Federalist 71, between the interests and the inclinations of the people. However, the analogy between individual interest and public interest is problematical. While interest implies a good, it implies a relatively low or narrow good; it implies, moreover, an individual good. The first definition of interest in the Oxford dictionary is "objectively concerned by having a right or title," and rights are primarily the possession of individuals. The foundation of the public interest, it appears, is individual rights. The beginning and the end of political life is the individual with his interest in and right to physical security and comfort; and the public interest is the maintenance of the conditions necessary for the enjoyment of those individual rights. One might at this point recall Madison's reference to "the permanent and aggregate interests of the community" and raise the question whether the public interest is a mere aggregate of individual interests or whether something else has to be added, and, if the latter, what that something else can be and where it comes from. These are serious difficulties and any fundamental discussion of


9. Compare with Ludwig Freund in Friedrich, Responsibility (The Liberal Arts Press, 1960), p. 35: "The problem of responsible leadership in democracy begins here with the seemingly subtle, in reality rather definite distinctions between wants, desires, and needs as synonyms of interest."

10. See Edgar Bodenheimer's exploration of this question in Friedrich, The Public Interest. Here also Gerhard Colm suggests the interesting analogy of a play, in which producers, actors, and audience, all motivated by self-interest, "find a common ground under the spell of the play as a work of art" (p. 127); but he does not raise the question whether "common ground" might be found—for example, in commercial television—under a spell that no one would think of calling a work of art and what the consequences of different grounds might be for the quality and level of self-interest as well as the public interest.
"public interest" must face them; but (and this is the immediate point here) they are not difficulties arising out of vagueness.

Regarding more recent writers, it must be confessed that the charge of vagueness has more plausibility. To the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence we find writers here adding those of the Charter on Human Rights. Added to physical security and comfort we find a right to individual development. Edgar Bodenheimer, expressing a general view, states the goal as "a well-ordered and productive community in which everybody has an opportunity to develop his capabilities to the fullest."11 "Individual development" no doubt makes a better starting point than quibbling, as George Nakhnikian does, about whether Lasswell's assumption of the desirability of preserving human dignity is any good, since it would not be useful to those who are not in favor of human dignity.

Yet is there not some reason to doubt what Bodenheimer thinks no reasonable man will censure, namely, the aim of providing "the widest possible opportunities for the activation of all human energies and talents. . . ."?12 Admirable as this aim may be in most cases, Bodenheimer himself recognizes that there are human energies and talents that ought not to be activated, for the sake of the further development of the individual himself as well as the community at large. Yet in the end there does not seem to be any basis in this widespread view, which Bodenheimer represents well, for saying what "development" consists in; there is therefore no basis for saying what kinds of activities and talents ought to be encouraged and what discouraged.

Accompanying this emphasis on individual development is a concern in these essays with procedures, the rules of the game by means of which the open society prevents itself from falling apart.13 There is a good deal of sensible discussion along these well-worn lines, with little disposition to inquire whether it is possible to give any meaningful and lasting procedural definition of the public interest when there is disagreement about the most important things. So far as the question is raised at all, the reply tends to be a formal one, as illustrated by Charner Perry's observation in Ethics and Bigness: ". . . the utilization of sources of agreement depends in large part on there being appropriate institutions for maximizing the results of

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11. Ibid., p. 212.
12. Ibid., p. 213.
limited agreement and for minimizing the disruptive effects of disagreement."^{14}

Another way of attempting to dissipate the vagueness of "public interest" is to explore its meaning, not in the abstract, but in the context of a set of concrete circumstances and problems. This is the aim, for example, of Stephen K. Bailey's essay in The Public Interest and of his, James MacGregor Burns's, and Paul N. Ylvisaker's essays in Ethics and Bigness. Yet although Ylvisaker's sharp, tight description of two cases of metropolitan decision making eschews any "genteel fuzziness" and all the essays are obviously motivated by a genuine perplexity about the public interest, in general and particular, a kind of tired cynicism is never far from the surface. What are we to make, for example, of Bailey's defense of the public interest as a "myth," which must nevertheless be given "rational content," and the value of which, it seems, lies in its very moralistic vagueness?^{15} Bailey seems to echo Pendleton Herring, who defined the public interest as a "verbal symbol" whose "value is psychological and does not extend beyond the significance that each responsible civil servant must find in the phrase for himself," and who yet saw the public interest as a standard for judging between one contending group and another: "Without this standard for judgment between contenders, the scales would simply be weighted in favor of victory for the strongest."^{16} So on the one hand, there must be a standard if the law of the jungle is to be avoided; on the other hand, there is no standard but rather an indefinite number of psychological, subjective feelings. The fruit of this tree is cynicism. The art of government or prudence, which these men seek to practice and to describe, is on their own principles groundless. Prudence cannot defend itself, as it once could, as being rooted in an understanding of the ends served because it is conceded that those ends are beyond or beneath rational understanding. Prudence cannot, therefore, defend itself against the attack that, far from

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14. Ibid., p. lx. Perry continues, "I think I have stated the main requirement regarding institutions in a pluralistic society: the requirement, namely, that they should be such as to extend cooperation beyond the limits of achieved doctrinal agreement and that they should be capable of utilizing for limited agreement the points of coincidence among the multiple strands of diverse myths and ideologies, and that they should be such as to minimize the bad effects of disagreement."


being the legitimate pride of the practical man, it is but a poor substitute for the theory or science of instrumental decision making.\textsuperscript{17}

These criticisms of its alleged undemocratic character and vagueness are, however, only a preface to the case against "public interest." At the heart of the case lies the third criticism, that it is unscientific. Schubert's root assumption is that if the concept of the public interest is to have any value, either as a guide to behavior or as a description of it, it must be capable of being made "operational," which, according to Schubert, "public interest" is not. This basic test is made more explicit by Sorauf. "Public interest," he explains, is one of the chief offenders in mixing together the "ought" and the "is," in confusing "the normative and the real." What is needed is, if not a completely "value-free" study of politics (because that is impracticable), "a maximum degree of separation of the two."\textsuperscript{18} The purpose of this separation is to enable political scientists to get on with their scientific study of the "facts."

It is not clear what Schubert and Sorauf would have political scientists or politicians or citizens do with the "value" questions, if anything. There are some attempts in The Public Interest, the most interesting being that of William Minor, to show the beneficial effects of such a separation for politics as well as science; but the benefits remain shadowy—at least as vague, indeed, as anything that can be laid at the door of traditional talk about the public interest. There is a good deal of truth in Cassinelli's remark that "the critics often say, in effect, that since we have difficulty in deciding what is most desirable in politics, we should stop discussing the issue."\textsuperscript{19} The happy situation of the economist, in this respect, has long attracted political scientists, but the economist can defend the partiality of his science by pointing out that there are others to deal with the whole—such as political scientists. As R. A. Musgrave says in The Public Interest,

"economic analysis has traditionally stopped short of certain noneconomic implications of economic processes. Thus it might be argued that a continuous increase in the standard of living may be demoralizing, that pursuit of the profit motive harms the trader's soul, and so forth. Economists will not deny that the concept of the public interest must be"

\textsuperscript{17} See the exchange between Edward Banfield and Herbert A. Simon in Public Administration Review, Autumn 1957, and Winter 1958.
\textsuperscript{18} Friedich, The Public Interest, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 47.
broadened at some point to include such matters, but they would hold this to be outside their province.\textsuperscript{20}

In view of their strong commitment to a "value-free" social science, it is interesting to observe that Sorauf uses the phrase "legitimate differences of interests" in the very essay in which he attacks the vague, nonoperational, value-laden term, "public interest,"\textsuperscript{21} and that Schubert uses a similar term, "legitimate interests," in his book.\textsuperscript{22} Even without the evaluating adjective, the term "interest" is full of difficulties from this scientific point of view. As Charner Perry points out, "'interest' does not denote an observable fact and is not operationally definable."\textsuperscript{23} Any argument directed against the meaningfulness of "public interest" is equally applicable to "group interest," and most of the arguments in common use throw doubt on the concept of "interest" itself. A whole family of favorite babies will be thrown out with this bath.

Even more significant than Schubert's and Sorauf's unself-conscious use of "interest" and "legitimate interest" is the former's use of "responsibility." The first chapter of Schubert's book, The Public Interest, is entitled, "The Quest for Responsibility," and it begins with the observation that "the search for forms of government conducive to responsible decision making is as old as political philosophy" (italics added). To have said "conducive to decision making in the public interest" would have carried roughly the same meaning; it would surely have been no more vague, no more incapable of operationalization, no more unscientific. "Responsibility" is used throughout by Schubert in the same old general unscientific way that we used "public interest" in the past, until Schubert and other stern scientific patriarchs told us to stop. Schubert concludes his essay in the Nomos volume, as he concludes his book, with the argument that "if the public interest concept makes no operational sense . . . then political scientists might better spend their time nurturing concepts that offer greater promise of becoming useful tools in the scientific study of political responsibility" (italics added). One could again reverse the terms, talk about the lack of operational sense in political responsibility, and urge the development of better tools for the scientific study of the public interest. If it were not for the common knowledge that our most vocal scientific students of politics rarely subject them-

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pp. 113–14.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 189.
\textsuperscript{22} Schubert, The Public Interest, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{23} Friedrich, The Public Interest, p. 245.
selves to a strict practice of what they preach, one might suspect the operation of a fairly simple shell game.

Responsibility as the Link

"Responsibility" is in even more frequent use today than "public interest." It is, moreover, more generally accepted as a respectable term, as Schubert's usage illustrates, perhaps because its "value" implications are a bit further from the surface. In any case, there is less emphasis here on attacking and defending the term and more concern with understanding it. One of the reasons for its popularity is that responsibility is, or appears to be, essentially a procedural criterion. Harlan Cleveland, for example, in his introduction to Ethics and Bigness, contends that ethical standards are "ultimately subjective, personal, individual" and that "each of us has both the freedom and the obligation to fashion his own ethical standards. . . ."24 Cleveland says that he cannot suggest an affirmative code of ethics for the government official (although in fact he does so), but he suggests a guiding question: "If I am publicly criticized, will I still feel that this is what I should have done, and the way I should have decided to do it?"25 This is not a bad first step in the quest for responsibility, but it is surely no more than that. Cleveland takes for granted the desirability of the official making his public face the same as his private face, a simple view of the relation between the public and private that is understandably questioned in several of these essays. He fails to consider what Friedrich for example does take some notice of, the different audiences by whom the official's action might be criticized and to whom he might have to make explanation. He relies finally on the "feelings" of the official whose behavior may be questioned.

That is by no means unimportant; it is even sufficient for many practical purposes, but it is not fundamentally sufficient. Decent feelings require training and support. They require at least the support of a general opinion that there are standards of better and worse behavior. Yet, as Senator Eugene McCarthy points out in this same volume, that support tends to be lacking in contemporary American society: "When a leading scholar declares that 'the seat of ethics is in the heart'; when it is acceptable to assert that the only absolute is that there are no absolutes; when religious and philosophical leaders lend their names to a declaration of their faith in man's

25. Ibid.
ability 'to make his way by his own means to the truth which is true to him'; we should not be surprised to find some government officials making up rules which may be convenient to their own purposes.'

Roland Pennock's provocative opening essay in Responsibility explores more fully the meaning of responsibility.

It is easy to get into muddles in connection with this term ['responsible government'], simply because we use it, often at the same time, in varying applications. We mean that the government is responsible to the electorate. . . ; it is accountable, in some not completely arbitrary fashion, for the exercise of its trust. But we also mean that it is morally responsible; that is, that it acts in a fashion that would be morally approved by disinterested observers (or by ourselves). It holds itself to account to high standards of duty, justice, and public welfare.

Responsibility has, according to Pennock, two primary meanings: "(a) accountability and (b) the rational and moral exercise of discretionary power (or the capacity or disposition for such exercise), and . . . each of these notions tends to flavor the other." Responsibility is a liability to answer, to give an account, to give reasons; the last is not identical to the first but implicit in it. Thus, responsibility is a procedural liability, but, as Pennock's discussion suggests, an obligation to give reasons implies the distinction between good and bad reasons; the truly responsible man is one who can give good reasons for his behavior.

Regarding the popularity that the term "responsibility" enjoys today, Pennock makes this interesting suggestion:

"Rugged" individualism stressed rights; the [totalitarian] reaction against this philosophy emphasized duties; we may today, I believe, be seeing the emergence of a new individualism in which responsibility is the central theme. . . . "Responsibility," then, is a term for use in a complicated, dynamic, quasi-organic society. In criminal law and in morals, increased attention to this notion reflects a growing belief that relations between "individual" and "society" are too complicated and involve too much dynamic reciprocity or "feedback" to be dealt with adequately by the concept of "rights" and "duties," "guilt" and "innocence." In politics, too, the term "responsibility" is useful for a period when simple concepts like "will of the people" are recognized as

26. Ibid., p. 46.
27. Friedrich, Responsibility, p. 10.
inadequate, and when "responsible" government is distinguished from "responsive" government and even from public accountability, although it includes the latter.29

Whether the old concepts, such as "rights" and "duties," "guilt" and "innocence," are so inadequate as Pennock argues may be questioned. In particular, it may be doubted whether "duty" is necessarily so narrow and rigid and so devoid of the exercise of judgment and discretion as he suggests. It may be that Pennock is misled in this crucial respect by his narrow view of the history of ideas. The totalitarian notion of duty, which, according to Pennock, came as a reaction against rugged individualism, was a false notion of duty, as is now universally agreed and juridically settled, in the Western world at least; and totalitarianism may not be the best place to look for the meaning of duty. Nevertheless, the increased concern with responsibility to which Pennock points is significant as emphasizing—if in a broad and general way—a dissatisfaction with what he calls rugged individualism, a concern for the development of a "sense of responsibility" for broader interests than those of one's self or immediate groups, and a belief that man's "full development" requires, after all, some participation in a common good beyond a general interest in being left alone.

Perhaps nothing is more widely agreed upon by the writers of the essays in Responsibility and Ethics and Bigness than the vital need for an increased and more widespread "sense of responsibility" in the United States. But how is this to be achieved? How, indeed, even to begin? The faith in the efficacy for good of increased popular participation in government, so much a part of the discipline of public administration in its early days, is now shaken—and for good reason. We are not less democrats but less simple-minded democrats.

"There was a time," Roland Egger says in Ethics and Bigness

when the enhancement of popular sovereignty—the maximization of public participation in decision making—was an effective counterweight to almost any excess in the concentration of political power, but none would today suppose that public participation could significantly improve the quality of the decision making process or relieve the President of the consequences of decisions. The extension of the franchise . . . is always a good thing, but it has nothing to contribute to the amelioration of the unbearable responsibility.30

29. Ibid., pp. 18, 19.
The notion of the "will of the people" seems inadequate to us, as Pennock remarks, because we begin to see what the best theorists and practitioners of democracy have always known, that the problem is the quality of the will of the people, its "sense of responsibility." And we are on the way to understanding what our ablest democrats have also always known, that with the full emancipation of the many it is especially important to look to the place of the few—not the hereditary few or the privileged few or the wealthy few, but the few of capacity and devotion to the common good, on whom the growth of civic responsibility largely depends.

Leadership in a Democracy

Norton Long, always provocative and often wise, is perhaps less successful in his essay in Responsibility in bringing into focus his hopeful picture of the responsible metropolitan citizen of the future than in sketching the too-familiar city dweller of today—"Like a Goth in the Roman Empire with his vote for a weapon, he may conceive himself as plundering an alien edifice." But Long draws out the essential point:

Democracy, as Irving Babbitt pointed out, even more than other regimes depends on the quality of its leadership. It depends on the self devotion of a natural aristocracy to the precarious leadership roles of a mass society. In fact the eliciting of the efforts of this natural aristocracy, its education for the responsible conduct of affairs and the provision of a significant and accessible cursus honorum are major requisites for institutionalizing responsible citizenship.

American students of politics, whose nation's leaders include Washington, Hamilton, Lincoln, and the Roosevelts, have strikingly little to say about leadership in a democracy. Students of public administration have scarcely been willing even to consider the issue except when it can be confined within some technical prison. Philip Selznick has, it is true, pushed vigorously beyond the technical limits and made a preliminary foray into the land of genuine leadership. But Selznick, who is not represented in these volumes, is still far less influential or reflective of general opinion among students of government and public administration than, for example, Carl Friedrich. It is of course impossible here to do justice to the learning and wisdom which Friedrich has brought to this subject in his numerous

writings, to which there are copious references in his essay in *Responsibility*. But when Friedrich suggests that "the responsible administrator is responsive to these two dominant factors, technical knowledge as well as popular sentiment," he differs in detail and sophistication but not in principle from the administrative writings of Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow.

It is significant that Roland Egger and Don K. Price, in their valuable essays in *Ethics and Bigness*, turn to American political history—as did Leonard D. White—for the deeper instruction that the doctrines of management have failed to provide. It is significant too that, while they ably discuss administrative organization and management, both are led to pursue the question of political leadership. "[W]e have not quite accepted," Price argues, "in some of the important segments of our society, the primary assumption which is the foundation of responsibility for policy—that the most respected citizens of the nation will themselves consider political leadership their most important calling." Unquestionably we require, as Price points out, "the dedication of a higher order of ability to both the political and the administrative responsibilities of government"; and we will get no more than we are willing to pay for. But there is a further consideration, which is the theme of the one-page comment by David Truman that ends *Ethics and Bigness*. Short as it is, this comment contains perhaps the wisest observations in this very long and often very good volume. While acknowledging the force and quality of the Egger and Price essays, Truman makes a qualification or reservation which has, and is no doubt intended to have, deep implications.

How [the ethical dilemmas of government] are faced, however, is not primarily dependent on whether "the most respected citizens of the nation will themselves consider political leadership their most important calling," as Price argues. Whether they assume leadership in this way or not may be of less consequence, given the apparent limits on the utility of the amateur in such affairs, than that the most respected citizens regard those who do accept the burden of political leadership as being engaged in the society's most important calling. This, it seems to me, is "the foundation of responsibility for policy," to use Price's phrase, the indispensable obligation of the chief beneficiaries of the system if it, and they, are to survive.36

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35. Ibid., p. 466.
36. Ibid., p. 468.
The high turnover of our political executives, for example, is harmful not merely because it interferes with the business of government, but because of its effect on general opinion about what the business of government is and where it stands in comparison with other businesses. The lesson is all too evident. Having obeyed the call to public duty, the political executive scarcely learns to find his way to his office without asking directions before he is planning to leave it. It may be that not much can be done about the transient character of the political executive; certainly suggestions for reform seem typically to be loose and superficial. It may be, indeed, that a large part of their work cannot be done well by amateurs. In any case, the difficulties at the level of the political executive make it all the more important to look to the quality, the education, and the self understanding of the permanent civil service.

The education of the civil servant is most deficient in its most important respect, and this includes not only his formal education but all of the instruction and advice aimed at him by the various representatives of the discipline of administration. The question of his responsibility—his duty, he may still say, especially if he is in military service—is that question about which the civil servant receives least instruction from his teachers and which is typically shrugged off with smug toleration or superficial relativism. He is in fact taught irresponsibility in the most important cases. He is taught to look to two standards: technical competence and popular will; beyond these he has no business to venture—and there are no higher standards anyway.

Yet it is where these standards are unavailable, or contradictory, or insufficient that he meets his most difficult and highest tests. How does he respond? If he can, he may try to avoid confronting such problems by securing himself in a narrow, comfortable haven of technical specialization and refusing to leave it. Or, he may emulate the world of private affairs, where questions of responsibility are less complex. He may conclude that the fundamental implication of his training in “management” is that the civil service, like all other forms of social life, is organized on the principle of dog-eat-dog and that his problem is to divert as much as he can of the available resources—material, honorific, psychological—to the satisfaction of his own private desires. Better-hearted, or less touched by his administrative training, he may conscientiously try to do his duty. What is significant is that in this last case he will stand very much alone. Of course there are many other individuals trying to do the same thing; but their institutional backing is, to say the least, slim.

The conventions of American public life, general opinions about
what is respectable and permissible, tend to draw the civil servant back from his highest public duties rather than to guide him toward them. Obviously there is no question here of solving the problem by legislating a code of ethics and brainwashing civil servants with it. Nor can it be ignored that the character of an educational system is profoundly affected by the character of the society; but the relation is a mutual one. Those who teach and write about administration and those who practice it help to form the character of the civil service and, through the civil service, of the community at large. It is due to his constraining education, as well as the powerful pull in American life of the private and the technical, that the civil servant has least understanding of his own doings when he is exercising his highest responsibilities.

The question of responsibility is the link between the civil servant’s particular business in government and that government’s business. It is the link between his particular problem of whether, for example, at his own risk to fight hard for a project he believes to be in the public interest and the basic ambiguity in the notion of “the public interest”: the tension between public wants and the public good. The understanding and practice of public administration begin in a willingness to confront that ambiguity. If, as Truman suggests, our society requires, “especially in its more privileged segments, a respect for and an understanding of the arts of governing”37 as society’s most important calling, that respect and that understanding will have to grow first among men who practice and study those arts. Perhaps then, even in the United States, the executive of the private corporation might come to emulate the man who serves the common good, rather than the other way around.

37. Ibid.